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SUBJECT: LEBANON: NGO HEAD SAYS HIZBALLAH FAVORS SHIA IN SOUTH LEBANON OVER THOSE IN NORTH BEKAA

SUMMARY

¶11. (SBU) Dr. Abbas Yaghi, a Shia local community leader from the north Bekaa region and Shia rival of Hizballah, described to Emboffs what he sees as Hizballah's favoritism towards the Shia in south Lebanon, to the detriment to those Shia living in the north Bekaa. Yaghi noted the vast differences between reconstruction efforts currently underway in north Bekaa in comparison to southern Lebanon, although both are predominately Shia areas. He said there is a lack of development assistance from the GOL, international donors countries, and Hizballah for the isolated citizens of the north Bekaa region and that they are in desperate need of access to resources and outside influences to combat traditional Hizballah, Syrian, and Iranian influences. Yaghi also gave an update on development projects underway in the northern Bekaa region and provided a summary of future projects he is planning. End Summary.

HIZBALLAH DEVELOPS THE SOUTH WHILE IGNORING NORTH BEKAA

¶12. (SBU) Emboffs met with Dr. Abbas Yaghi, head of 'ACT for Lebanon' on December 4 to discuss development projects in north Bekaa (Note: Bekaa is the valley region running north to south in central Lebanon. End Note) Yaghi, a local Shia leader with strong family ties to the north Bekaa region and who views Hizballah as a rival to his family's own secular organization, vented his frustration at what he sees as Hizballah's efforts to discriminate against local Shia leaders like himself who refuse to join Hizballah and who are seeking to improve conditions in their communities without the organization's help. With its position of strength and lack of competition, Hizballah continues to gain ground in north Bekaa according to Yaghi.

¶13. (SBU) Nevertheless, Yaghi said that Hizballah still favors the Shia population in South Lebanon at the expense of development in the north Bekaa region, whose less educated and more isolated citizens actually need it more. Perhaps, said Yaghi, Hizballah feels it has to try harder to keep southern residents' loyalty. Meanwhile, Shia loyalty in the north is being taken for granted by Hizballah because citizens of the north Bekaa region are almost completely dependent on Hizballah for local development, unlike their Shia countrymen in the south.

¶14. (SBU) Yaghi also highlighted what he sees as disproportionate levels of assistance between south Lebanon and north Bekaa, two regions where many Shia live. In his

opinion, the Bekaa has seen fewer development funds invested in the area from the GOL, international donor countries, and Hizballah in comparison to the south, where development efforts are clearly visible and being funded by a number of local and international actors. Yaghi claims that there are so many schools in the south that a number have had to be shut down due to a lack of students. However, the opposite is true in north Bekaa, where there are not enough schools for all of the students. Yaghi also said that even before the 2006 war with Israel, there were clear investment projects in infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and electricity plants in the south, funded by international donors. Yaghi noted that, except for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and a United States Agency for International Development (USAID)- funded Mercy Corp project, there are no development projects underway in north Bekaa.

¶15. (SBU) Yaghi said that this disparity exists because of the fact that the south has, over the years, seen an influx of different actors who play a role in the area. Yaghi added that the Israelis, Europeans, and now the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Government of Lebanon (GOL) have all been, or are now, present in the south. Yaghi noted that the LAF and GOL had no presence in the south, unlike the Israelis who were present in the region from 1982 to 2000 and United Nations peace-keepers (UNIFIL) who have been present in south Lebanon since 1978 and continue to be present in the area today. Yaghi said after the Israeli withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000, Hizballah became the dominant force in the region, until the end of last summer's July War with Israel when the LAF deployed to south Lebanon for the first time since 1968 to enforce Security Council Resolution 1701 and the GOL began trying to reassert it's presence as a governing

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body in the area after a 40 year hiatus. Yaghi believes that the south's "cosmopolitan" history and geographic location have helped raise its level of strategic importance and attract more reconstruction assistance. Yaghi argued that north Bekaa has remained relatively isolated from the outside world due to its poor roads and mountainous terrain. Yaghi said that Bekaa residents have a much more restricted mind set and mentality due to the area's location in a valley between two mountain ranges. According to Yaghi, citizens of the north Bekaa region only know the Syrians and Hizballah and should be exposed to influences from the wider world.

SMALL PROJECTS UNDERWAY IN BEKAA

¶16. (SBU) After lamenting about Hizballah, Yaghi then talked about two projects under his supervision in particular, being initiated by his organization in the northern Bekaa region. First, Yaghi has begun work on a business center for small and medium enterprise institutions. Services will be offered to residents who need to use computers, copiers, fax machines, and scanners. Yaghi added there would also be office space available in the building for residents and business owners to rent as their own personal office space at a low cost.

¶17. (SBU) Yaghi has also begun construction on a multi-million dollar sporting complex. The complex will include a soccer field, basketball court, tennis, volleyball, and swimming pool. Yaghi said next door to this complex is a Hizballah controlled mosque. He is hopeful that no problems will arise between the residents enjoying the mixed gender swimming pool and the conservative mosque attendees. Yaghi noted that the GOL built a huge sporting stadium in the Bekaa, however, because its an outdoor field, it is only available in the summer and is not very useful outside of this season due to the area's harsh mountainous weather. Yaghi added that at the moment he only has land for the sporting complex and that he would need an investment of around USD 2 million to complete the project. MEPI Emboffs told Yaghi that MEPI funds do not usually go towards infrastructure projects.

¶8. (SBU) Yaghi also commented on his organization's participation in raising over USD 170,000 for the "Teach For All" initiative in Lebanon, modeled on Teach for America. Yaghi's organization is represented on the local Teach For All group's board of directors and the board hopes to raise around USD 1 million for the program for its first year. However, Yaghi noted that all of the money to date has been raised in the United States, primarily from Lebanese diaspora living in the New York area. Yaghi commented fundraising is difficult in country given the lack of emphasis placed on charitable giving in the Lebanese society and culture.

COMMENT

¶9. (SBU) Yaghi's father was a former member of parliament and mayor of the Bekaa city of Baalbeck. However, due to Hizballah's growing strength in the area, this seat traditionally held by his family has gone to Hizballah. Yaghi himself wants to run for parliament, but does not want to fight with Hizballah over his father's former seat.

¶10. (SBU) Yaghi seems to have a number of good ideas about developing the Bekaa and is looking for a more informal, low key, and flexible partnership. MEPI funding may be more appropriate in terms of assisting Yaghi with training or materials for his business center of providing some type of assistance to the Teach for All program. End Comment.

FELTMAN